

Tore's Daughters



As Retold by Tom Baker

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Introduction

I first learned of this story sitting in front of an old-fashioned television set, watching an old-fashioned VHS cassette rented from an old-fashioned video store. One of the people sitting with us would go on to commit suicide; he was a NamVet, and, in a strange way, considering it was one of only a handful of movies we ever watched together, that is ironic.

The movie was a 1970s exploitation shlockfest called *Last House on the Left*, and it starred a musician and bit horror actor named David Hess, who recorded the remarkable cult soundtrack for the film. Other performers included Jeremie Rain, porn actor Fred Lincoln, comedian Marc Sheffler and softcore actresses such as Sandra Cassell and Lucy Grantham. It was directed by Wes Craven, who, in subsequent decades, would go on to become one of the kings of low-budget horror films, finding lasting fame as the creator of the hideous pop culture bogeyman of the Eighties, Freddy Krueger. A few of Craven's fixations, such as booby-trapped suburban homes, can be seen to have their beginnings in this film. But that is not really important.

The tone of the film alternated between a sort of vapid, porn-level delivery, and scenes of social satire and commentary, cleverly painting the distinction between Mari's middle class familial milieu, and the hedonistic, amoral lifestyle of the four villains. When Mari (Sandra Cassel) steps out with her friend to go to a shock rock "Bloodlust" concert (shades of a then-popular Alice

Cooper) , a concert where it is reported that live chickens will be dismembered, she finds herself shocked at the urban squalor of the neighborhood where the concert venue is located.

When this otherwise "good girl" transgress and decides to try to buy marijuana, she makes the fatal mistake of trusting the shifty, creepy junkie Junior (Marc Sheffler in an amazing performance), following him back to the squalid, unfurnished apartment of the other three escaped cons.

Mari and Phyllis Stone (Lucy Grantham) are confined, sexually abused, and then hustled, the next morning, into the trunk of the car so the gang can get away. Sadie (shades of Susan Atkins, whose Manson Family moniker was "Sadie") is revealed the night before as a lesbian, which, of course, was shocking stuff in the early Seventies.

The soundtrack, which had formerly alternated between mournful space folk and weird, jangling incidental music, now takes a turn for a kind of rousing barbershop vaudeville, complete with humorous meta-referencing vocals.

What follows is the most grueling and infamous parts of the film, with the girls being tortured and violated by the jeering, psychotic villains in a woods. After a revolting rape, the girls are left unguarded, prompting Phyllis to make a run for it. A brisk chase ensues with Weasel (Fred Lincoln) and Sadie (Jeremie Rain) chasing Grantham through the woods to a small abandoned graveyard. At one point, Grantham picks up a rock and hits Rain in the head with it, calling her a "stupid dyke" (a scene that wouldn't

pass muster in these politically sensitive times). She is accosted though by the absent Krug (David Hess) who makes a reappearance wielding a machete. Weasel dispatches Phyllis with a few stabs from his handy switch blade, and she is then dismembered (in scenes that were later heavily edited).

The gang returns to Mari, who has been trying to get the feckless Junior to escape with her back to her home; ironically, Mari realizes her house is just a few yards away out of the woods.

She doesn't make it. Krug drops Phyllis' bloodied severed hand onto Mari, then rapes her like a repulsive animal. The music during the scenes of dismemberment changes over to weird synthesizer squeals; after the rape, it alternates to a bluesy, mournful tune called "Now You're All Alone."

Mari gets up, promptly vomits (which leaves Krug looking embarrassed) and wanders, zombie-like, into a murky pond. She seems to be resigned to her own sorry fate. Krug coldly dispatches her with a shot from his pistol.

The killers wash themselves in a creek, then make their way to the closest home--unknowingly, that of their victim, Mari.

Mari's parents (soap opera actor Richard Towers, who is credited as "Gaylord St. James," and an unknown named Cynthia Carr), who were preparing a birthday celebration for her, have now become worried since she did not return home; their decorations and cake now hang limp and cold.

Alerting the bumbling local lawmen did little good; the Sheriff and his oafish, moronic deputy spend the rest of the

film as comic relief, trying desperately to get back to Mari Collingwood's, their cruiser having "run out of gas." Twice they are rebuffed, once by a group of heavy metal hippies (who "hate pigs"), and a second time by an elderly, seemingly mad black housekeeper with a truck full of chickens. In other words, they are useless, and the tragic comedy of errors continues to play out in the same manner.

The four killers, having thoroughly washed themselves and dressed in stolen finery, make their strange way across to the residence of Mari's father, who is apparently a doctor who works with addicts. (That he should have recognized the dope-sick Junior was one when he first arrived seems a given.)

The criminals give a preposterous story in which they alternately describe themselves to Mari's perplexed and worried parents as insurance salesmen and plumbers. They act themselves when the two law-abiding adults are out of the room, cutting the telephone cord and ogling the "old lady."

They are treated to a strange dinner in which they behave with loutish, pig-like manners. The hosts, by now in despair for the fate of their daughter, still manage to find themselves puzzled at the behavior of their "guests."

We later see them sprawled comfortably across Mari's bed, sipping some liquor they've obviously absconded from their hosts. They are lying under a peace symbol, looking reflective and glum. The peace symbol is the central image of the film, as Mari has been given one she later gave to the junkie Junior.

Junior is, predictably, not lying with the others, but it

sick in the restroom, dope-sick. Mari's mother hears him retching in the middle of the night, and goes to attend to him.

As she leans over him at the john, he rears back his shaggy head, revealing the especially engraved gold peace symbol necklace Mari's mother gave her before she disappeared. Now fearing the worst, Mari's mother alerts her 70's soap actor father, and the two of them steal out of the house and down by the river, in a scene so dreamlike that it is only, appropriately, followed by a literal dream sequence.

They apparently find the body of their daughter.

The next scene has the degenerate sex maniac Weasel (porn actor Fred Lincoln) opening his mouth for Mari's parents, who are both dressed as surgeons, and who thus proceed to put a bit and chisel to his front teeth, pounding down hard before we see Weasel jump up in bed, startled at his nightmare. (Note: We don't have the space or inclination to go into the Freudian connotations of the "hammer to the front teeth" symbolism.)

Next, we see Mari's father in the basement, looking for possible weapons, and ways to boobytrap the house (a Craven motif that would recur in subsequent films with predictable regularity). Mari's mother, meanwhile, is standing in the living room when the awakened Weasel comes in, his shirt unbuttoned, smoking and looking as if he is trying to be seductive. The mother picks up on his cue, realizes it is her chance to get rid of one of the killers, and takes him outside by the lake.

Mari's father booby traps the house, electrifying a

doorknob, spreading shaving cream on the floor, running trip wire across the entrance to the hall. Mari's mother, meanwhile, is outside with Weasel, and dares him to let her fellate him with "his hands tied behind his back," as he has boasted about. Unsuspecting and endlessly horny, he lets her. At the moment of climax, while he is making vulgar pronouncements, she castrated him with her teeth, spitting his mutilated penis into the lake.

His scream awakens Krug and Sadie, who sit up in bed staring into the barrel of a rifle held by Mari's father. Krug pulls a lamp off the nightstand, plunging the room into darkness. A shot goes off, screams erupt, a struggle ensues.

Krug and Mari's father grapple. Sadie actually rebuffs Krug's pleas for help with her own knife. Racing outside, she is followed by Mari's mother, and her throat is slit after she jumps into the backyard swimming pool. The "stupid dyke" is now dead.

Krug lays a few good punches on Mari's father, calling him a pussy and telling him Mari was "tougher than him, she was hard to kill." In a truly bizarre scene, Krug convinces the tragic Junior (who has taken a gun and is aiming it at Krug, who is his biological father, if not his spiritual one) to stick the gun in his mouth and "Blow your brains out! Blow your brains out! Blow 'em!" Junior obeys, commits suicide, and Krug finds, to his surprise, that the tables are now turned, as Mari's father is now menacing him with that exploitation movie classic--the chainsaw. (The use of the chainsaw in "Last House" actually predates that of the Texas Chainsaw Massacre, and was something of a stroke of prophetic genius on the part of the producer,

Sean S. Cunningham. Craven's original idea was that Krug would be slashed repeatedly, thus "dying the death of a thousand cuts." Cunningham wisely vetoed this for the more dramatic and grisly chainsaw.)

Mari's father becomes the sadistic predator (the "shoe is on the other foot" theme implicit in the tale), chasing Krug around the room and sawing up tables and chairs, while Krug blunders into the booby traps, slipping in shaving cream and getting zapped by the electrified doorknob.

Finally, the two bungling policemen burst into the Collingwood living room, which now resembles a war zone. The fat, stupid sheriff screams for Mari's father to stop while it is implied he is killing Krug by sawing him in half.

Mari's parents topple over, exhausted and bloody. Behind them, her birthday party banner hangs crookedly from the ceiling. The prey have become predators; the middle class milieu has been invaded by violence, hatred and blood. It is fitting that this movie was made at the tail-end of the Vietnam War era; it is a comment on the sort of society many people reasonably assumed we were becoming: an hypocritical society wherein murder and malice were hidden under a thin veneer of bourgeoisie sentimentality and evocations of "peace." Yet, how close was the killer instinct still implicit on the soul? How thin the veneer of "civilization"?

How just was an inscrutable God? How reasonable the vicissitudes of fate?

Lingering questions, presented in a "bad" piece of low-budget cinema; albeit, still a classic (whatever that happens

to mean).

The inspirational nucleus for this shlockfest, Bergman's *Virgin Spring*, is predictably more stark and restrained, but, for all that, seemingly more brutal in its unflinching summation of the tragedies and ironies of fate. The Father (Max Von Sydow) is played unerringly as a Medieval stoic, dedicated to God, devotion and grueling labor. His wife (Birgitta Valberg) is a terminally guilt-ridden (about what, one wonders) Catholic penitent, and neither of them have any sort of physical charm or appeal. Their daughter (their "only one") Karin (Played with child-like arrogance by Birgitta Pettersson) is a somewhat anachronistic teenage princess, seemingly spoiled and perhaps a little arrogant and self-satisfied. (After all, how many medieval girls asked for breakfast in bed? We'll wager not many.)

She is helped by her mother into a fine shift, and sent off by her to take "candles for the virgin." (In a preceding scene, we have seen the mother burn herself with hot candle wax, in penance. Again, one wonders: what, specifically, is she doing penance for?)

Karin is accompanied by a shifty-eyed, somewhat sinister and dark young serving wench who is noticeably pregnant. The girl opens the film by blowing a fire atop a stove (perhaps giving fire or a soul to the film of the old legend--a symbolic rebirth?) The girl is angry and sullen, tormented by her unwanted pregnancy, and obviously envious of the pale, pudgy and undeniably happier and more loved Karin, who is devoutly Christian (the serving wench actually opens the film by praying for the presence

of Odin.)

Both girls set about on the journey. In a short space of time, they come to the cottage of what I believe is a fisherman. He is an incredibly ugly, grizzled man, but the shifty servant-girl has a sort of agoraphobic attack, and complains to her mistress (whom she has hitherto berated out of jealousy) that she is too afraid to continue on through the dark forest alone, and that she will stay at the cottage of the fisherman while her mistress continues on alone.

Karin, a completely unsuspecting and somewhat smug child, goes on without the servant girl. The girl joins the fisherman in his odd little cottage (a place that seems to have creek water racing through it), and Karin rides on.

In a short amount of time, she encounters three rough vagabonds, one of whom is playing a mouth harp. Of the three, one is merely a child, and one seems to be incapable of any speech save for a toad-like groaning. The overly trusting Karin makes some funny small talk with them, before taking pity on their hard-luck story of starvation and wandering. She sits down with them to picnic, breaking bread but first making sure that everyone has said their prayers.

The ruffians fall hungrily upon their food, but, after being sated, decide that Karin now proves far more interesting. At first, thinking they are merely playing a game, Karin teases them about their compliments of her "white skin," calling herself a princess and relating that her father is a king. The brutish predators draw close to her, making her increasingly uncomfortable.

Meanwhile, the serving wench escapes an attempted rape by the bridge keeper, running off into the woods and following the trail of her mistress until, crouched low in the bushes, she happens upon the scene.

The twin vagabonds close in menacingly. Karin begins to look frightened. Suddenly, they fall upon her, wrestling her to the ground. They violently rape her. Ingerl is watching from the bushes. She picks up a rock to throw at Karin's assailants. She finds herself unable to do this however, and drops the rock when the mute brute shockingly gets up from his act of rape and brandishes a long branch. He proceeds to beat Karin to death with it.

Ingerl flees the scene in terror. Karin's body is left, like a too-white fish, broken and obscene, to die on the carpet of earth. The two murderers warn their young charge to watch the body (what for one wonders), and then walk off to rifle Karin's things. They take her pretty shift.

A truly disturbing scene transpires while the two killers are off. Their young brother, entranced and perhaps somewhat aroused by the image of Karin's dead body, turns, vomits into the frosty earth, and approaches it cautiously through the brush.

Pityingly, he begins to try to cover it with handfuls of dirt. It starts to snow. The whole scene is so stark, horrific, and yet somehow so poignant, that the viewer will be hard-pressed to think of this in any other way than a descent into brooding self-absorption. (Also, the casual viewer may begin to thank his or her lucky stars they were not born five hundred years earlier.)

Of course, the trio eventually make their way to the

home of the redoubtable, rawboned Tore, who has begun to be slightly worried at the fact that his daughter has yet to return. He appears at the entrance to the home dressed in a cloak and hat, looking as if he is about to go searching through the woods. The three killers beg admittance to the home, and Tore unwittingly gives his daughter's killers refuge, as "it is going to get very cold tonight."

The three settle in to break bread with Tore and the hired hands. Conversation seems odd, stilted; later one of the hired hands begins to speak with the youngest of the three ruffians about the souls of the damned, penitence, and fiery Hell.

The boy is properly terrified. By hook and by crook, the mother begins to suspect that the trio know the whereabouts of her daughter, have perhaps done something terrible to her (a confirmation of the bitter guilt, perhaps, she feels is her wont by dint of her religious devotion.)

Her worst fears are confirmed when, as per the legend, one of the filthy killers tries to sell her the "pretty shift" she has made for Karin, a shift with a few blood drops on it. Tore's wife quickly goes to him, informs him of her secret fears, and the rest of the film unfolds predictably: Tore accost the shifty, skulking trollop in the barn, forces a confession out of her.

She tells everything she has witnessed. The pretty pagan feels she is completely responsible for her mistress' death, as she secretly willed it into being, or somehow invoked the gods to carry out her most jealous wishes.

Because, of course, she was angry at the virtue of Karin, and disgusted with her own lack thereof. (According to the

morality and psychology of the film.)

Tore is beside himself with grief. What follows is a strange ritual wherein Tore tries to pull down a tree, commands the serving wench to gather birchwood branches, cleanses himself, then has himself beaten with the branches after pouring a bucket of hot water over his head.

We could put all of this down to a rapidly deteriorating mental state, perhaps. Or, more likely, it is a private ritual of religious purging. Tore, feeling his retribution is that of any avenging father, possibly feels he is doing the Lord's work.

He reappears wearing a leather apron and gloves, strange boots, and carrying a bizarre knife. He is dressed as a butcher, or someone from a slaughterhouse. He knows he has grisly work ahead of him, and that his victims are little better than animals.

He quickly dispatches the trio, even the young boy (by throwing him into the wall), and then seems to be sated. His vengeance spent, he has tried to mete out perfect justice.

Later, searching through the woods, they find Karin's pale, plump body where the killers have left it. Overcome with grief, they move Karin's lifeless remains, but are astounded as, from the place where her head finally rested, a "virgin spring" of water suddenly appears, as if by a miracle.

Tore throws himself to the ground, folds his hands in fervent prayer, and declares, because of this miracle, that a great church shall be builded on this place, to

commemorate this great miracle.

(Or to expiate his guilt for taking the "Vengeance of the Lord" into his own hands? Begging the question: When do we cross the line in becoming as evil as our own worst enemies? Or, what separates us from our worst enemies and most dreadful foes? What makes us better than the vilest of men, and where does justice end and revenge begin?

Furthermore, what sort of God allows the presence of such manifest evil to exist in the world, and consume the young, the innocent and faithful? A God worthy of veneration and servitude?

More troubling questions presented by the *Virgin Spring*. Proof, once again of the strange, lingering power of this particular medieval tale.

As an addendum, in 1989, the Namvet with whom I originally saw *Last House* committed suicide by self-inflicted shotgun blast. I would not think of him often for decades, but, one night, whilst in the grip of one of my many disturbing dreams, I recall being in a sort of storehouse with empty shelves. Maybe it was some sort of thrift store, I'm not sure.

I went up to one of the shelves and pulled off an old jean vest (really an old denim jacket with the sleeves scissored off). It was the sort of jacket the suicide veteran liked to wear. Like something from the Sixties.

I opened up the pocket. I pulled out some sort of medal (a Purple Heart?), and saw that, at the bottom of it, a little tag had the name MILLINER. It was his last name.

I thought again of violence and sin, of retribution,

tragedy, war, evil, and *Last House on the Left*.
And now, without further ado.

Tore's Daughters
As Retold by Tom Baker

Prologue

The wind howled and the snow drove furiously around the creaking, submerged wheels of the old wagon. The tall, stern man tried, as best he could, to guide his poor old nag by the reins, but the creature was half done-in; he wondered, exactly, when the animal would finally drop from exhaustion, and they would be forced to eat his remains to stave off hunger and the ever-present shadow of death.

Inside, shivering behind the canvas flaps, a mother and her two children huddled together for warmth. They had eaten the last of the food, and the weather was so bitter, and more of it, a mighty storm, seemed to be coming their way. The mother prayed to God for deliverance, without any hope that God would answer.

The old nag neighed; her feet plunged through the blowing drifts. The wind howled like the screeching of a banshee.

"Oh Lord, we beseech thee, deliver us. Shine thy goodness and mercy down upon us..."

The woman continued her fervent prayers, In her lap, her children were, momentarily, being lulled to sleep, despite hunger and exhaustion, and for this she was grateful.

perhaps God answered prayer, after all.

It was not long before the horse could no longer continue, before the man went back to check on his young family.

Lifting up the tent flap, his breath misting out in front of him, he looked into the frigid darkness beyond, at his young bride huddled in misery. Huddled, with the body of their two children clutched in her arms.

The man looked at the woman.

The woman looked at the man.

They exchanged something silently, some hidden knowledge of WHAT MUST BE.

The mother shook her children to wake them. With bleary eyes they came around, sitting up, slowly remembering their cold and hunger.

"Children," she said to them, her voice filling with tears,

"something has happened, and you both must go out into the forest and find the tall, skinny man. He lives in a house made of...gingerbread, and pudding. He'll feed you, and keep you warm."

The two boys looked confused for a moment, shivered and rubbed their eyes. One asked, "But, aren't you coming with us?"

The mother looked at the children sadly, and said, "Oh no. The tall skinny man is...of the fairy folk. He only takes little children into his house, and he'd just have to turn us away at the door, for we are too old, and his magic wouldn't work. Now don't you look so sad and cry! Here, let me help you into your coats..."

And she bundled them up quickly, and told them, "As ye

go out into the forest, ye shall see a light shining brightly in the northern sky. This is the guiding star. Keep a going that way, and never let up following the direction of that star. Ye will come to the house of the fairy man, in time. Now, off with you! God...will see thee on thy way."

And she sent her tearful children out into the howling cold and darkness. The two little boys went slowly, reluctantly; they were obviously filled with fear. The littlest one kept looking sadly back, tears freezing as they rolled down his skinny little face.

The mother looked them over stoically, saying, "Goodbye, my children, goodbye. God see thee on thy way!

And the children headed off into the gloom and darkness. Later, the man and the woman ate the remains of their food, and then ate the carcass of the skinny old nag. They sat in silence near their dwindling fire, huddled together for heat, expecting a death that they feared may never come.

How they survived well...that is another story. Now, we flash forward many, many years, to begin a new story.

Part 1

The three girls put on their pretty shifts. The youngest one, Mary, had had a vision the preceding night.

In her vision, she was carrying her parents around in a basket on wheels. They had heavy silken shrouds pulled up to their chins. They were all in a disused room, on the

uppermost floor of an ancient house. Soon, a man in a black cloak came in, to show them the view from the roof. Eagerly, Mary had followed the man out into the rainy day, her feet gritting against the wet gravel of the roof. She looked up into the grey sky.

Behold! She saw a vision of a radiant woman floating in the air. She immediately knelt on her knees, not at all feeling the rough stone of the flat roof, and folded her hands; for, she knew immediately that she was in the presence of the Blessed Virgin.

The radiant woman spoke to her calmly, lovingly.

"Daughter, arise! I have a great work in store for thee. Then, afterward, all the world will know of the great sacrifice of love which thou hast made, to heal the wrongs of the past. Go, get thee to the altar at sunup. and pray! All thy sins are cleansed white as snow!"

And Mary rose to her feet, and looked at the dazzling woman, whose hands were spread out majestically at her side. And, suddenly, it was as if three mighty waters came rushing forth from beneath her white gown. And, as Mary looked on in mounting horror and awe, these mighty waters soon turned to blood.

She awoke in a cold sweat of fear, trembling and breathing heavily. Next to her, her sisters still snoozed soundly, unaware of the incredible vision she had just received. A flash of lightning and a low rumble of thunder seemed to chill her sweat-soaked body. She crept from bed, went out into the parlor, where her mother was busy knitting her a new shawl.

"Oh, Mother! I have had the most terrifying strange

dream!"

She knelt at her mother's knees before the fire, while her mother busily cradled her head in her hands. After she was finished, her mother said, "I believe that you have had a special blessing from Heaven tonight, a sacred vision. You must go at dawn to the old church beyond the forest, and make an offering at the altar. Your sisters can accompany you! Go immediately after you've said your morning prayers and done your chores, and do not tarry long! But, the Lord will see you safely on your way."

Mary began to weep.

"Oh, Mother, of course I'll go! You must tell Papa when he awakes. Oh, he'll be so happy for me, that the Blessed Virgin chose me to appear to in a dream!"

And with that, the elated girl went back to her room. She found it impossible to sleep, however, and spent the rest of the night huddled in bed, prayerfully listening to the thunder and rain outside, as heavy drops pattered against the window late into the night.

The next morning, she awoke to find her room empty. Her sisters were already dressed and washed, had eaten, and had done their assigned chores. They both appeared in the doorway, tittering.

"Mother awakened us early, and told us all about it. We think it is wonderful! Come and eat! We've already done all of your chores for you!"

And with that the two sisters left her alone to dress. Mary washed at the basin, threw her clothing on quickly, and then knelt at her bed to say her prayers. She prayed fervently, then arose, her eyes swimming with tears, and

went out to eat her breakfast.

She was surprised to see Papa standing there, eating an apple, his eyes a little worried.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to accompany you to the church today. I want you to be cautious; stick to the road, and everything should be fine. If you get into any trouble, just blow this whistle and I should hear it out in the fields, and I'll come running. I should be able to hear it...oh, a long way in the distance. God go with you. I'll pray for you all."

And with that, Papa turned and strode out the door to his work in the fields. The girls tittered excitedly to themselves for a moment, before Mama came forward with the new shawl she had knitted for Mary just the night before. It had a most wonderful and unique design on it, a pattern that looked like an elaborate cross. Mary took it from her mother, thanked her, and turning to join her sisters, headed out the door and into the early morning sunrise.

Papa waved at them as they walked from the gate and out to the road. Mary yelled that they would return before nightfall, as quickly as their legs could carry them.

It looked to be a beautiful day as the three eager young women walked, merrily through the steadily thickening canopy of trees. Above them, the sky was blue and rolled on forever and ever, punctuated here and there by fluffy white clouds. A murder of lazy crows circled round, here and there cawing in agitation. They could be seen,

intermittently, through the tree branches, which had just started to turn and lose their leaves. Below their feet, the damp earth clung to their shoes, squishing a musical

counterpoint to their murmured, quiet conversations.

Unbeknownst to them, circling crows overhead were not the only eyes--beady and black, sinister--keeping track of their journey through the dense little woods.

A rough, dirty little man crouched in the brush, hidden. Like a hungry wolf, his jaws dripped spittle as he saw the beautiful young girls carrying their lunches and fine clothing. He turned to his brother, "Forsooth! You see her there Bob, eh? A pretty little piggy, yes! And two more besides, all ripe for the taking!"

His idiot brother laughed, until Claude whacked him over the head and told him to be still. The youngest brother, John, sighed miserably as he crouched behind the two larger men. He was use to this dreadful routine, but his familiarity with it did little to calm his nerves or ease his mind.

"Quiet fool!" hissed Claude. "Now, you just wait till I give the signal!"

And, after peering at the passing girls through the dense shrubbery for a moment more, Claude boldly stepped from his cover, clearing his throat and walking with an erect, dignified bearing that did not fit his raggamuffin appearance.

The girls had been talking softly amongst themselves, going slowly upon the trail when Claude stumbled from his hiding place. They grew instantly still, alarmed; they looked like startled animals caught unawares.

"Hallo," said Claude, without much cheer. "And where might you three pretty young things be going on this balmy morn?"

The girls were silent for a moment, while the angry-looking ruffian circled them menacingly. Then, Mary found within herself the courage to speak, haltingly:

"We...we are on our way to church. We are going to pray, offer penance. Last night, as I slept, I was visited by the Blessed Virgin..."

At this, the ruffian laughed. Calling over his shoulder to his comrades in the brush, he said, "Hey Bob! We got us three little pilgrims here! Come on out, and take a gander!"

Bob stumbled forth from the brush, followed by the boy John. John had seen this all before, but it did little to calm his nerves. He felt sickened, as he was powerless to stop his villainous father and uncle from doing what he knew they would do next.

The filthy ruffians circled the three girls menacingly, as the trio cowered together, uncertain of what to do. Claude produced his blade, came quite near to Mary, who could smell the grog on his filthy breath.

"Aye, you're a pretty lass! You fancy being a highway man's wife? You, and your sisters?"

Mary groaned in disgust, and then fell to her knees weeping.

"Oh, please sirs, have pity on us! We have come to go to church, as the Virgin instructed me last night in my dream. As you honor and fear God, please let us pass safely to our destination, and do not hinder or harm us!"

This of course did nothing to quell the tormented spirit of Claude, who gnashed his teeth and stomped his heels in the dirt like a child. His face grew scarlet with rage, and he exclaimed, "Silence! Are you telling me you refuse, you

and your sisters, to become the wives of a trio of highwaymen? Is that what you're telling me?"

There was a moment of silence, before Mary answered with a simple "Yes."

At this Claude raised his clenched fist to heaven, swore blasphemous oaths, spat, and swung his saber wide.

He lopped off Mary's head with a single blow.

The other girls must have thought, for a moment, that they were dreaming, as there was a long, passing silence. Then, amidst the growing puddle of their sister's blood, they began to rush about and scream. Oh, that they could have only kept their wits about them! Perhaps they could have found some way to appease the wretched criminals, and eventually escape their sorry fate.

But it was not to be!

"Quickly, quickly Bob! Kill them before someone hears them!"

And Bob chopped off the heads of the other two sisters. Then, both men splattered with blood, Claude, still breathing heavily under the force of his anger, said, "Now, we have to bury them proper, so's no one will be the wiser. But, look, lets take their food! And, these fine shifts are a little bloodstained, but still look valuable. Here--"

And he took from the three dead girls their fancy shifts, and carefully cleaned them on some leaves. And then he had the boy, John, drag the bodies to the riverbank.

"Weight them down with stones in their pockets," said Claude. "They'll sink sure enough. Hurry, you fool. The sun is almost set, and I want to get inside somewhere and lie down before nightfall."

The luckless John did as he was told. Finally, exhausted, he took the body of Mary, and prepared to cast it into the river; then he noticed her rosary clutched in her cold, stiff fingers. Without Claude seeing, he managed to snatch it, and hide it around his own neck under his tunic. Then he slipped the body in the water.

"The heads, well, I got an idea of what we can do with the heads!"

And he went to fetch three long sticks, and, sharpening them up, had John bring around each of the heads. Then, he staked each head to one of the long branches through the neck; walking far back in the brush, away from the woodland path, he put each of the stakes into the ground, the heads stuck on them like grisly totems.

"Someone will find them, sure enough, and know our handiwork!"

Claude stepped back, wiped the sweat from his brow, crossed his arms over his chest, and looked satisfied with himself. A cloud passed over the sun, darkening the day. He quickly began to feel a sense of unease.

He noted, curiously, that where he had spiked the head of the eldest sister, a sort of trickle of water was coming up from the ground. Water...mixed unmistakably with blood. His brothers came to stand beside him. John whistled long and slow.

"That bodes ill for us, Claude. P'raps we should have just let them be."

Claude felt the first few stirrings of fear grip his heart. Dismissing the feeling angrily, he turned to his brother, said, "You yellow-bellied, lily-livered cur! What a coward

you are, ascairt of a little trickle of water! You disgust me!"

And Claude spat, turned, and trudged off down the road, careful first to stop and collect the food and elegantly woven cloths their victims had been carrying.

"Come on, you dogs!" he spat venomously over his shoulder. The three went slowly down the path, away from the scene of carnage they had created.

Part 2

At dusk, Tore began to be afraid for his daughters. Karin tried to keep her panic at bay, but she had great difficulty as she stirred the pot of stew, weeping tears into the hearth.

"They should have been home long ago," Tore suddenly said. His face was very solemn and grave.

Karin looked at him. Her mouth was a bleary frown of worry.

"I shall go out looking for them, " Tore said, almost as if to himself. He slowly put on his cloak, grabbed his hat and his stick, and then an old lantern. He headed out the door, turning only to say, "Keep dinner warm. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Karin said nothing, but dutifully continued to stir the pot. Tore strode across the yard toward the old forest path. He held the old lamp at his side as he went. It was a passing dark night.

He started on to the trail, watching carefully for any signs of his three missing daughters. Sadly, he was a farmer, not a tracker, and saw little to aid him in his search.

He walked ahead, into the darkness of the overarching trees, until heavy rain began to fall.

The rain came down steadily, and the wind picked up into a gale. He suddenly realized he would have to discontinue his search until the rain stopped. In those days, if a man were out in the elements, he might catch pneumonia, which could be fatal. He would be no good at finding his daughters, he knew, if he was lying sick in bed.

With these troubling thoughts in his mind, he turned and began to head back when, suddenly, he spied three dark, strange shapes coming out from the bushes up ahead. They looked to be ruffians or vagabonds, he surmised. He was too cold and preoccupied to be afraid, however, and they were directly in his path, so he strode boldly forward as if they didn't even exist.

A flash of lightning revealed Tore to them for a few seconds. The heavy rumble of thunder drowned out what the leader was saying.

"Forgive me, squire, but my brothers and I have found ourselves lost and exposed to the elements on this wicked night. Would you perhaps know of a place we might bed down for the evening, in exchange for good honest labor or barter?"

Another flash of lightning revealed the speaker to be a toothless, ugly scarecrow of a man, covered in filth and probably crawling with lice. He was clothed in rags and tatters, as were his brothers. The rain and wind, no doubt, were washing the heavy stink from them as they stood there.

Tore thought for a moment, but the wind and heavy rain

decided him, and he said, "You can pass the night at my farm. Come, we have stew and three warm beds. In the morning, you can join me in searching for my daughters, who have gone to the village church, but have yet to return. I know they are safe, though; the Lord is watching over them."

At this, the three vagabonds seemed to suddenly grow strange, but their leader said "As you say, squire. As you say!"

And then the four men hurried along the path to the yard of the old farmhouse, longing to be out of the sudden downpour.

Karin was watching out the window, her nerves on pins and needles, as they say. She suddenly saw the light of the old lantern bobbing back and forth in the darkness, and it eased her a little. She rushed to the door.

Karin was quite confused to see Tore return with the strange, ragged men, but she said nothing. Tore came in the door, said, "These men need food and shelter for the night. I told them they could stay with us, and help me continue the search in the morning."

Karin's heart sank within her chest.

"Then you saw no sign of our daughters, nor where they might have disappeared to?"

She was almost weeping as he shook his heavy solemn head, "No."

Karin stifled her grief however, as the three strangers, who, by custom, deserved every courtesy they could be afforded, were in need of warm clothing and food. She

bade them take off their wet rags, and she went to hang them so they might dry overnight. In their place, she gave the three vagabonds her husband's cast-off clothing, which was quite large and ridiculous-looking on the small men, but which was, at the very least, dry.

"Now sit down, sit down! I'll pour each of you boys a bowl of rabbit stew. I'm sure you must be famished!"

"Why yes M'am," said Claude, licking his lips greedily. The three men devoured the stew as if they hadn't eaten in days, and Tore and Karin looked at them in astonishment (and not a little disgust at their foul table manners).

When they had eaten their fill (the stew pot was now empty) the three men leaned back, and Claude began to belch.

"Oh Missus, that was a passable fine meal, indeed! Why, you and your husband have been so kind to us! You must let us repay you some day."

There was silence for a moment, then Tore said, "Help me search for my daughters in the morning, and that will be payment enough."

At this, Claude sat Back, scratched his chin, and considered. His brother Bob belched loudly, and the little one, John, seemed to suddenly feel ill. He began to look a little pale.

Claude finally said, "Say there, squire...Could we interest you in purchasing some fine woven fabrics? We're merchants, you see, traveling salesman, and we deal in fine fabrics and suchlike."

Tore, who felt he couldn't be any more astounded by the odd behavior of his guests, was taken quite aback, but

managed to stutter, "Why, I'm not sure. I suppose I'd have to see them first."

Claude smiled, put forth his hands as if to placate a worried customer, and said, "Of course! Of course! You shall not purchase before you see the goods!"

He turned his head to his little brother, and spat, "John, get our packs!"

And the youngest brother got up from the table and trudged into the corner, where the soaking packs were stowed. He rummaged through one pack for a moment, before bringing forth the wet but still undeniably beautiful cloths they had stolen from their three victims.

"Here," said Claude, "have you ever seen such fine workmanship in all your born days?"

Claude smiled jubilantly, a grin missing most of its teeth.

Karin felt her eyes bulge and her mouth drop open. Tore remained exceedingly calm, his stoic eyes staring at the spattered and stained cloth as it was held above the table at his face.

All he said was, "It...it seems to be stained. Funny. Almost looks like...blood."

At this, Claude blanched a bit, said, "Probably just a little gravy." He hesitated, then said, "Still a remarkably fine fabric, wouldn't you agree? Must be worth a pretty penny? Say, two kroners?"

Tore scratched his chin, said, "A bit steep for a few shifts, but, as you say, it is superior workmanship. Now, I'm afraid my wife and I have to retire for the evening, it having been a very trying day. I will sleep on it, give you my answer in the morning."

Claude seemed a little uneasy, but smiled the same unappealing smile as before. Tore and Karin got up from the table, and went to their bedroom. Karin went first, and Tore lingered for a few moments in the hall, watching his three "guests" from the shadowy corner. They whispered amongst themselves like greedy conspirators, but Tore couldn't really catch what they were saying.

When he entered his bedroom, he found his wife sobbing hysterically into her pillow. She said, "Oh those awful men! How could they? How could they? Did you see those shifts? Those were our daughters' shifts. Why, they've stolen their clothing and murdered them!"

Tore stood silently for a moment, then said, "I know. But wait until morning. We will settle it then."

Karin suddenly looked alarmed.

"What are you going to do?"

Tore put up his hand, said, "Wait...until morning."

Then he took off his tunic and got into bed. But he did not sleep.

As usual, Karin was up before dawn, baking bread. When she had awoke, Tore was gone.

He had been to the smithy. He was the first customer of the day, and his request was simple: he wanted a band of iron fashioned around his waist. The smithy looked at him strangely.

"And what could possibly be the reason for that?" the smithy inquired.

"It's a private matter, I'm afraid", said Tore, trying on his new, heavy belt, and buttoning his coat. The manufacture

of the thing was quick, and as Tore made his way back to the farm, the sun was climbing in the east.

He came into the kitchen just as the lazy, dirty vagabonds were stirring from their bunks. Karin was placing trays of food on the table as they were getting settled in to eat. At seeing Tore come through the door, Claude raised his hand and, with a smile so phony it would have made a common street swindler blush, said, "Good morning to thee, squire! Hast thou thought upon our bargain for the fine wares we shewed thee?"

Tore said, "Aye."

To which Claude replied, "And, what, pray tell, is thy answer?"

Tore suddenly exclaimed, "This is my answer!"

And he whipped forth a broad axe, hidden in the folds of his cloak, and he swung at Claude's head. He missed, and the vagabond fell out of his chair and rolled onto the floor. He got up, exclaiming, "So now you know, eh? I figured out late last night that you were the father of those three little piglets we slaughtered in yonder woods! But I figured you as too daft to realize what we had done. Now I see that you recognized the weave of the shifts we showed you, and want revenge. Well, we're a tough lot to kill!"

And Claude lunged across the table at Tore. The old farmer was long in years, but, unbeknownst to Claude, he had once been an expert swordsman and quite a fighter in his youth.

He swung his axe upward. Claude veered out-of-the-way.

He was not quick enough, though; the axe buried itself

between his eyes, chopping his nose in half and sending out a horrific spray of blood across the dining room table. Claude fell upon the table, upsetting the dinner and throwing several platters of food upon the floor.

Bob, the idiot brother, stood motionless for a moment before lunging forward, his arms raising up to strangle the life from Tore. Or, at the very least, to attempt to.

Before he could get very far, however, He doubled over in pain, grabbing his side. His eyes traveled, in horror, from the gaping wound in his side, the knife that protruded from his torso, to the arm of Karin, who held that knife in a cold, steady, iron grasp. Her face was set in solid stone, but her eyes blazed in righteous indignation and triumph. Bob fell over in a puddle of his own blood.

Tore stepped forward and cut his head from his shoulders with one clean swipe. Then, looking around, Tore and Karin suddenly realized there was only one brother left. They began to back him, like stalking cats, into the corner, and Tore drew a short sword out of his belt. John backed away from them in terror, begging his life, exclaiming "Please! Please, have mercy on me! They forced me to accompany them in their crimes! I am but a lonely orphan! They were orphans as well, sent out by cruel parents to die in the forest, long ago!"

Tore suddenly stopped. He looked curiously at Karin, whose face had now erupted into a look of shock and amazement. Tore turned to the boy John, and asked, "And, pray tell, who were their parents, boy? Knowest thou that?"

The boy paused before stuttering out, "Tore Toreson. Their mother was Karin."

At this, Karin burst into tears, and, grabbing the short sword from her husband. threw it into the corner. Tore stumbled around in confusion for a moment, remembering many years earlier, when he and Karin had been ragged pioneers, starving to death in the wilderness. They had sent their two small young ones out into the forest to forage for food, but knew, secretly, that they would most likely never return. And they hadn't.

However, they had survived, only to kill their own lost sisters, and then be slain by their Ma and Pa!

Tore said, "Very well. You shall stay with us, John."

The boy crumpled into the wall, gasping his breath, thanking Tore and God, again and again.

It was the next morning that Tore and Karin went into the woods to search for their daughters' bodies. They walked the bright, seemingly merry trail for a long while, casting forth here and there in the brush, but finding nothing.

"Alas," said Tore, "I am no good at tracking!"

They had thought of bringing the boy John along, but had let him sleep away his grief and exhaustion instead. If they did not find the bodies soon, though, they would go and fetch him. Suddenly, they heard a strange trickling in the brush.

"Listen," said Karin, cocking her ear. "Why, it sounds like a babbling brook! I don't remember a stream being here--"

Tore rolled his eyes, as if to say, "It's been so long since you've been in these woods, how could you possibly

remember whether or not there was a stream here?" However, he held his tongue. Karin pushed aside some brush, bent, pointed, and exclaimed "There, there's a little trickle of water moving through here...it seems to emerge from back there."

And they both followed the stream through the bush, to the old clearing. It was here they saw the three stakes and the rotting heads of their murdered daughters. Karin fell to her knees, weeping terribly.

Tore began to yell and shake in fury, and finally tore his tunic off in anguish and mourning. Karin looked in wonder at the strange iron band he now wore around his waist.

"What hast thou done to thyself, oh my husband?"

Tore turned to her, tears streaming down his face, and said, "When thou wast sleeping last night, I went to the smithy, and had him fashion for me this belt. And I shall wear it always to remind me of this day, when grief threatens to pull my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave!"

And Tore fell to his knees, folding his hands in prayer, and said, "Oh Lord, thy ways are strange to us! But let us not sin by questioning the wisdom of your ways. Forgive us our sins, and let thy will be done in all things."

And he stood, seeming to finally find a sort of strange peace, and told his wife, "Here, on the sight of this miraculous spring, which has come out of the ground where the head of our beloved daughter has been placed, I will build a great church with my own hands. It will stand here a thousand years if it stand a day. And they will tell the story of this day for years, and years to come."

And, do you know what? That is exactly what happened.

Of course, the years laid a sort of eerie unreality to the events, and, after Tore and Karin died, long after, and after there was no one left alive who had even knew them, people began to question if the old story was nothing more than a piece of local lore.

The church still stood though; seemingly it might stand forever. Tongues began to wag, down the ages, telling of mysterious shades in the "haunted" woods. The image of three mysterious sisters, forever headed to visit the village church, but, forevermore, being lost upon their way.